

The “So What” of Initial Entry Training

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INTRODUCTION

As budget cuts approach the Army, there will be inevitable reductions in many areas of the force. One enterprise that will be reviewed is Initial Entry Training (IET). Consisting of all Basic Combat Training (BCT), Advanced Individual Training (AIT), and One Station Unit Training (OSUT), IET encompasses the core training function of introducing civilians to Army culture, physically toughening them, training them in basic Soldier skills, and teaching them Army Values. It also instills commitment to the Army and the Warrior Ethos, so Soldiers are ready to perform effectively in their first unit of assignment (FUA). As senior Army leadership analyzes the future of IET, a careful look at where IET is and the problems that can so easily beset it is worthwhile. The IET force is already depleted, and further deep cuts will create significant detriments to the Army and the quality of its Soldiers.

A cursory introspection of IET yields a false belief by some that the initial training mission can be minimized. This incorrect argument stresses that most tasks can be accomplished in some distributed learning before the Soldier enters the Army, or many tasks can migrate to the first unit of assignment where already overburdened tactical units will have to teach everything. As budget cuts come, reduced manning is thrust on IET units to the point where company units can barely accomplish their mission, and all flexibility in execution is eliminated. With IET struggling to survive, a culture problem within the Army emerges that limits any desire to be associated with IET. Severe budget cuts will have residual effects that are detrimental to the entire training base. Since Commanders and units know how to conduct initial entry training now, we must preserve what is necessary to execute and support training. If there is a smaller training load, it will be necessary to consolidate training locations and remove unit structure to maximize efficiency and effectiveness with the few dollars that remain.

IET IS AN ENDURING MISSION

IET is an enduring training mission for the Army. We will always have to recruit new Soldiers and prepare them for combat when they enter the service. Since it is always going to be around, it must be made successful for the long haul. There are fundamental aspects of transforming citizens into Soldiers that require perpetual training and inculcation. For example, civilians will have to receive physical training to toughen them. We can try to move the conditioning training to the Future Soldier program done by Recruiters, but this transference has not worked well over the last decade. Soldiers still need to come to BCT and AIT to get in shape. Currently roughly 30% to 40% of Fort Jackson arriving Soldiers fail the 1-1-1 Screening Assessment (1 minute of push-ups, 1 minute of sit-ups, and 1 mile run conducted at the beginning of BCT). These are high quality recruits when recruiters can cull quality much better than before the economic downturn—they still fail physically in large numbers. The focus here is not to complain or shift blame, but rather, to emphasize that Soldiers will always need hard physical training upon arrival in the Army and that our cadre works very hard to whip them into shape. This cadre, therefore, must be high quality and capable of being on the stand in front of Soldiers—leading PT from the front.

Apart from being in shape, society also struggles with teaching values comparable to those of the Army. IET units continue to acculturate arriving new Soldiers and instill Army Values into them. We can try to pre-train values prior to them arriving at BCT, but IET has shown that Soldiers need DSs and AIT PSGs to model the values. Soldiers experience the stress of training and living in the Army environment and then internalize the Army Values. Immersion in a value-based environment is critical to instilling the values. We need our very best NCOs in front of the Soldiers to teach values. There are 21 video values vignettes that cadre has to use in the current programmed instruction, but the Drill Sergeant still must teach and model them. A platoon of Soldiers will have difficult questions during these classes and

throughout the cycle, that leaders have to answer on the spot. Quality in the cadre is critical to internalize the attributes that we need in the 21st Century Army.

Apart from the physical appearance changes that civilians receive immediately upon arrival at the Reception Battalions, such as haircuts and new uniforms, Soldiers must learn their basic combat and military occupational skills. These tasks enable their success in their first unit of assignment and in combat. Again, there will always be a need to train them upon arrival. We can push some minimal tasks ahead of reporting through the Future Soldier Program or a distributed learning approach, but there is no substitute for the hands-on, Drill Sergeant led instruction that they receive in BCT or OSUT. The equipment and range requirements also necessitate BCT and AIT. Delaying training to the FUA only hinders them with an unprepared Soldier arriving at an installation and then creating multiple unofficial new miniature ATCs all over the Army at Division or Brigade to meet the unprepared training requirement.

THE MANNING IMPERATIVE IN IMT

Budget restrictions have already hurt the quality of IET training. Insidious reductions across IET have left units incapable of training their full, historical loads. Existing cadre TDAs and fill rates have IET units at minimal manning that can ill-afford any further reductions. A solid case can be made to expand certain positions across IET battalions and brigades, but these efforts have been unable to gain traction in the resource constrained environment of the past several years. As IMCOM also looks at cuts in range operations and mission support, the operational trainers will have to absorb the increased work load of what is transferred to them. As a result, overworked cadre will cover down on more ranges, and Drill Sergeants will do what it takes to train Soldiers. Efforts to improve training quality are undermined when there is insufficient cadre to do the training. The best of ideas may become only distracters to cadre that struggle to man ranges and accomplish the basic requirements of the training day. The cuts to an already thinned IET need to be surgical at best. Large wholesale reductions across

the board will be devastating to the quality of IET and set it back a decade. With the current structure and training models, there can only be few cuts before the unit becomes ineffective and its load drastically reduced. Hence, it is better to have one good properly manned company than two drastically under-manned companies.

IET has certain cadre positions that are critical in the training process. Drill Sergeants (DSs), traditionally manned at 100%, are the primary trainers in BCT and OSUT. At a 1:17 instructor to student ratio in BCT, the Drill Sergeants model what Soldiers should be. They are coach, teacher, and mentor. With three Drill Sergeants per BCT platoon, their days are long and packed with training, counseling, and supervising. In a gender integrated environment, TRADOC Regulations also require that one of the three DSs in the platoon be female. This manning requirement is spot on as the women DSs role-model for the female Soldiers, often communicate better with new female Soldiers, and combat inappropriate relations across the IET environment. When assignment levels of overall DSs, both male and female, drop in units to levels such as 75% as currently experienced by Fort Jackson, the risk in training increases. Safety, quality of training, and Soldier development will all suffer.

Since DSs and AIT Platoon Sergeants, the main mentor for AIT Soldiers, are so pivotal in training, their shortages unhinge any flexibility IET units have. In BCT, companies are required to remain at or below 230 new Soldiers per cycle for their maximum fill. They ideally are below 220, but sometimes are asked to surge beyond the ceiling of 230 up to 240. With insufficient cadre, you can barely train 200, and increasing beyond that presents dangerous risk conditions, especially in the summer heat of all Army Training Centers (ATCs). Units also accept daily risk as the three DSs per platoon are reduced by a daily Charge of Quarters (CQ) requirement, rotating Battalion Staff Duty Noncommissioned Officer (SDNCO) slots, sick cadre, and family emergencies. On the best of days at 100% manning, you will be down two to three DSs. Additionally, as our Army struggles to place all NCOs in their required professional education school slots for their own development and promotion, IET units often accept the DS

absence in order to ensure the cadre is not hurt on a promotion board for not having a school. Units tend to not send any cadre to school in the summer heat/surge or when cadre numbers are low. With perpetually low cadre numbers, units cannot send cadre to schools anytime of year which only exacerbates the Army problem, hurting the DS. These issues remain applicable to AIT Platoon Sergeants as well.



First Sergeants are critical in BCT and AIT companies as they are in any tactical formation. Their diamond trumps the Drill Sergeant hats and leads to better functioning companies. They provide the maturity and leadership in the unit. They help the Company Commander who often is a non-career course graduate from various branches, some of which have minimal exposure to the BCT skills. Many companies in IET are currently run by E7s instead of E8s. Combined with junior Company Commanders and a shortage of DSs, they yield conditions that border on the 1990s Aberdeen scandal. Units are working very hard to train through these conditions, and senior leadership is working to reverse the negative manning trends. Budget reductions with reduced personnel replacements will not help the current situation.

The Drill Sergeant School (DSS) is not operating at full capacity, adding to the continuation of the current manning problems. Capable of four 120-student classes (total of 480

at any time), the school averages around a 10% no-show rate to the course. Additionally, of those who fail out of the course, 57% are a result of the PT test and being overweight. These are prerequisites that the unit is supposed to sign-off as the NCOs having passed before they arrive at the DSS. As the Army reduces strength, it must ensure that there is sufficient cadre in the school both as students and as Drill Sergeant Leaders (DSLs). The school is currently manned at 80% strength in DSLs—again reductions will degrade this number if not carefully monitored. Senior leaders will address the quality of what is showing up at the DSS. They also need to decide if the school should keep what it gets and train them to standard rather than sending candidates home before they are in shape as it did a few years ago.

Another reason that IET can ill-afford to sustain substantial personnel cuts is that it has already been the bill payer for many of the past reductions. Its TDA is bare bones. Training brigades and battalions have minimal staffs with no extra personnel. TDA installations have moved precious slots around to man what was needed to train over the last several years in an effort to improve the TDAs. Guided by TRADOC, there is no fat to be trimmed at the lower levels. On Fort Jackson, units cannot man Training NCOs in companies. These individuals do much of the coordination and training records for the large volume of new Soldiers. The work has to be done, so those companies with no Training NCO move the workload to the DSs and company staff. Again, the leadership has just put another rock in the company leadership's rucksack. After ten years of war, the deployed force has rightfully received the resource priority. However, IET has been belt tightening the past several years in areas such as manning, ammunition, and spending. A resulting structure for a unit has emerged—man the units properly for the training load, and eliminate entire units that are unnecessary for the projected load.

AVOID TWO ARMY CULTURES

As the Army examines the importance of the IET mission, it needs the same quality to lead its IET units and be its cadre as the field Army. Leaders should be able to go from IET assignments in TRADOC to tactical assignments and back again throughout their careers. Drill Sergeants are a good example of this successful migration as boards look favorably on its duty. It is unclear if the numbers support this for AIT Platoon Sergeants, generally regarded as lesser duty by those unfamiliar with IET. In the officer ranks, Company Commands are seen as less in IET. Captains in BCT companies are told to go get a second tactical command in combat arms branches if they want to be competitive for Battalion Command. We must fight against the appearance that IET companies are inadequate and not really branch qualifying in the same way that a tactical company would be. Battalion Commanders in IET have substantial counseling and development of subordinate officers—many who struggle with their future assignment patterns and if their service will be recognized as valuable.

Battalion Commanders in IET also are uncertain with their own career direction. Most IET Battalion Commanders, especially in BCT, are not being selected for Brigade Command. Some of the best Battalion Commanders from Fort Jackson are retiring. We must ensure that IET command tracks are not terminal. IET Battalion Commanders bring valuable experience to the Army and can contribute significantly to units. Now, many are told to go to a Brigade Combat Team Deputy Commanding Officer (DCO) position after their Battalion Command to be competitive for Brigade Command. The message is loud and clear—their IET command was insufficient for further progression. Regardless of this negative career assessment, they are primed for IET Brigade Commands, if not tactical brigades, or other significant jobs. Lieutenant Colonels involved in IET, as well as the force, are watching what is going on and about to happen. We need to keep the officer quality and move IET forward with the experience we have gained.

Junior officers look at what is happening around them and to their peers. Schooling selection, end of tour awards, selection for special programs, and future assignments should mirror those across the force. The oversights permeate the culture, but send a clear message that non-IET is more important. From the way tactical commanders talk about IET assignments to what senior Army leaders do for IET leaders to even something as small as the AUSA Green Book consistently listing all Brigade Commands except those in IET, we must level the playing field between commands through the O6-level. Some assignment officers still even tell leaders to go to IET to “take a knee.” IET leaders tell anyone that will listen that this is not true, but they are generally preaching to those already in IET who know that is a misconception. TRADOC Headquarters recently received the Army Superior Unit Award, and it was well-deserved. What would an IET unit have to do to win one of these awards? Would their contribution be viewed as significant enough to warrant this important award?

CONCLUSION

IET is critical to our Army. Without a steady influx of new Soldiers and leaders, we have no future. Reducing the quality of the Soldier’s training in an era of increased responsibility at the lowest squad level is not the way to go. We need to maintain tough, realistic training, so the outcome of IET is a well-trained, thinking Soldier who is prepared for the first unit of assignment. If manning levels and other resources drop significantly, the training will be hindered. If the IET culture becomes a “leftover” assignment that is a career dead end, the quality of the cadre will diminish. We must ensure all cadre assignments are as well-respected as Drill Sergeant duty currently is across the Army and on promotion boards. As the Army transitions into a smaller force of the future, senior leaders realize the continuity of training brand new Soldiers. Experience dictates what is necessary to do it well, and we must bring them into a world-class Army in the right way to build the future quality Army.

The heavy cuts the Army will receive may require leadership to relook where BCT should be conducted. In this instance, there may be efficiencies to be gained by moving BCT to selected ATCs in a consolidation effort. The approach should not be to “salami slice” but rather to concentrate BCT training to avoid transshipments and gain economy of scales. Leadership expertise at that ATC can better supervise and gain the experience of IET. The Army will need to determine the appropriate training load to maintain the force, but the reduced amount may have to be trained at fewer locations. As this article has argued, keep the locations well-manned and prepared for their mission.